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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

Children with special educational needs deserve more parental support in their learning than ordinary children do. Most parents are reluctant to involve themselves fully in the profession they are not experts in. Educators would want to guard their profession jealously and might view parental involvement as an intrusion into their traditionally long and solid profession. This paper discusses some of the fears educators have in lowering their profession if non professionals tampered with the profession they have no training of. It also discusses those problems faced by parents in trying to involve themselves in the education of their children. The paper further suggests ways of making professionals in education equal partners with parents of children whom they teach. Undoubtedly, the benefits derived by children with special educational needs from equal partnership between parents and specialist educators are too great to contemplate. Parents are the first uncertificated teachers of their children. They have a lot to offer to teachers whose professional knowledge could benefit from the information supplied by parents.

1. Introduction

The concept of parental involvement seems to assume a new phenomenon in the education system in Zimbabwe. Parents are now looked upon to play a major and more meaningful role in the education of their children. The graduation of the parents' body from a mere school building committee, unconstitutionally organised to a constitutionally instituted Parents' Teachers' Association (P.T.A.) and now Schools Development committee (S.D.C.) is full proof of parental involvement in the education of their children.

When parental involvement in the education of their children is viewed lightly, it will be realised that parents have ever been involved in the education of their children right from the beginning of the first school in Zimbabwe. The mere will of the first parents to send their children to the first school was in a way a measure of their involvement in the education of their children. This was indirect involvement.

Many parents of children with special needs in this country have not been so directly involved in the education of their children. Most such parents have been breeders of negative attitudes towards their handicapped offsprings. It has been suggested (Mittler, 1978) that parental involvement needs to take on a new philosophy. Parents need to be trained to carry out professional programmes through parents as partners in the education of special needs children.

The successful education of children with special needs, according to Warnock (1978) is dependent upon the full involvement of their parents. However, Docking (1990) realises that the area of parental involvement presents great problems of intensity and extensity. The problems faced by parents in the education of special needs children and solutions to such problems are the major discussion of this paper.

2. Problems

- (a) The philosophy of parental involvement is engulfed by a lot of problems. According to Wolfendale (1985) professionals' lack of confidence in their own skill can be a major problem inhibiting parental involvement in the education of their handicapped children.
- (b) Many professionals lack training in working with parents. Very often their training is directed towards the attainment of academic achievement.
- (c) Teachers may have the feeling that their professional training and position are being undermined if non-professionals get involved in their profession.
- (d) Parents might feel their involvement is being used for wrong priorities by the school e.g. fattening the school authority's pockets.
- (e) Parents may find intervention into educational matters an imposition on their time and an intrusion into their family life.

- (f) Parents might be overprotective to their children and as a result may not fully implement the home based programmes.
- (g) Parents might feel the school is not doing enough for their handicapped child and by the same token some teachers might think parents are getting too much into their own shoes.
- (h) Continually seeing high achievements by "normal" children might continue to be a thorn in the souls of parents of a handicapped child as they feel their child would equally be doing well had he not been so handicapped.
- (i) Some parents (Gerald, 1975) give the appearance of being over ambitious for their children. Other parents have a rosy view of their children yet they are poor performers at school.
- (j) Homework could be unpopular and unfair in that it makes widely varying demands on children and parents too. For children doing homework may be the T.V. is on, or a brother is opening the radio or parents are conversing with a visitor in one corner of the house. This causes disruption to the one studying. If not properly used, homework can be a weapon of confrontation between the parents and teachers.
- (k) Parents are out of touch with modern techniques of teaching and learning hence their participation might cause discord. There is the fear of professional dilution by non-professionals. Some teachers see homework as counterproductive as they feel parents teach children the wrong way which would be terrible for the teacher to rectify.
- (l) There is the danger of lack of confidentiality on the part of some parents e.g. gossiping between each other about some children's inability in certain activities.
- (m) Parents' presence at school might cause behaviour problems to children in classrooms as some teachers may not feel comfortable in the presence of parents. There is fear of parental overthrow of teachers.

- (n) Many parents are both working and have no time to be fully involved in the education of their special needs child. The list is endless.

The problems highlighted above seem to be low powered yet they are highly inhibitive in as far as parental involvement in educational matters is concerned. These problems however should be viewed as instrumental to searching for ways in which parents can actively participate in the education of their children. Below are some hints by which parents may be involved in the education of their children.

3. Solutions

The view can be taken that children are learning all the time, that is, using their sensory equipment, receiving, storing, processing information, outputting on a selective decision making basis. On the other hand, parents contribute their life experience as well as accumulating knowledge of their own child's development and individual characteristics and have the advantage of experiencing minute by minute child contact in a variety of situations. They too according to Davie et al (1984) can upraise their child's learning responsiveness; they can make predictions as to outcomes and make a match between what a child needs with whatever resources and support the home and the family have to offer. Teachers bring knowledge of child development of theories of learning and teaching and have the advantage of an accumulating store of professional wisdom as the backcloth of their practice. They can appraise individual difference in learning receptivity, rate of learning, and can match each child's learning needs provision on offer.

Parents need to participate whole heartedly in the education of their special needs child. They need to encourage their child and provide a good working environment for him or her. Where they are capable parents can render assistance to their child. The school should provide a good home-school relationship. The home and school relations are no longer a matter of choice a sentimental feeling among some teachers that it is somehow more decent to have pleasurable client relationships. They are a matter of acute professional concern. The teacher or school which refuses to consider the concept that the child plus the parents, rather than the child minus parents, is the proper unit of treatment is, to that extent, acting unprofessionally.

It is noted with appreciation that Craft, Raynor and Cohen (1980) showed that home environment was more closely related to educational attainment than intelligent

quotation was, by then, becoming very strong evidence for the importance of the child's home environment for his progress at school, and also that the influence of parental interest on test performance was greater than that of any of the other three factors viz - size of family, standard of home, and academic record of the school. Thus a more fruitful partnership between home and school should be encouraged.

The strength of the parents, child and school in a common effort should be endowed and the child's learning should be expanded at home. Children should not be deprived of learning when they are at home. Since learning is a process, they would in any case continue to learn at home whether professionals like it or not. Thus teachers should see themselves as complementing the parents' educative role.

Early intervention programmes can not succeed if parents assume the role of spectators. The success of intervention programmes is central to parental involvement as equal participants in their child's educational programmes.

When parents ask for information or advice on how best to help their child, it should be readily given them as this promotes the success of early intervention programmes. For the success of early intervention which is vital to successful education of special needs children, parents have to be involved in matters of their child's education. Intervention will be carried out on the basis of equal partnership between parents and professionals. Parent and child develop consistence in their interaction. Parents' perception of their child is essential as it helps professionals how to steer the child's educational programme.

One very important aspect to realise is that parents are already teachers. Usually they notice first that there is something wrong with their child. Intervention should enhance rather than distort further the child's positive experiences.

3.1 Recognition

Working with parents or involving them in the education of their children implies recognising them as partners in the enterprise, respecting their individual values and strengthen on a par with professionals; and mutually admitting weaknesses. This strengthens further the partnership and desire to learn from each other.

It is recognised that early intervention requires to involve parents actively, not only to improve effective services to the child but also to support the family system. If

properly done parents will be effective change agencies with their child.

3.2 Equal Partnership

Partnership, according to Mittler (1978) can take many forms but it must be on the basis of equality, in which each side has areas of knowledge and skill that it contributes to the joint task of working with the child. This calls for the understanding of the needs of the families and the views they hold about their handicapped child, his abilities and limitations and the rediscovery of themselves on their competencies to cope with this dimension.

In another edition Mittler (1982) sees partnership as implying equality of parents with professionals in defining intervention strategies and goals, recognising the different strengths each side brings to the partnership and what knowledge and perspectives each side lacks. Each handicapped child, and each family, is unique, and stereotyped expectations need to be questioned continuously. The achievement of a partnership relationship thus relies on establishing good communication, sharing information and skills, and also sharing feelings openly, whether those feelings are of doubt and worry, or of satisfaction.

The family and the school move and change from time to time; they each have a life cycle and the point in this cycle at which each participant has arrived, will influence what each is looking for, expects from and is able to contribute to the relationship with the other. The pupil is an active mediator of the relationship. There should always be a closer cooperation between home and school. Both teacher and parent have to learn to steer a fine course between arousing a child's apprehensions and letting him give up trying. With special needs children both parents and teachers continue to learn more as they work with handicapped children. None can claim to be an all and outright master.

Any involvement with parents at the level of partnership must demonstrate the cardinal principles of reciprocity, mutual involvement, mutual accountability, mutual gain and mutual trust. It has been proved that parental involvement improves children's performances at home and school is enhanced.

Parents are the first teachers of their children from birth and a continuation of this utility of involvement in school is only proper and right. By extending the context

of learning beyond the confines of the classroom and school, the child finds a wider range of constructive learning situations. The teacher develops his or her professional role as a facilitator of learning wherever it takes place, and the parent gains skills and confidence to extend his child's learning. Where the relationship is right, with a high degree of mutual trust between parents and teachers there will be an effective flow of information in both directions for the progress of the child.

3.3 Involvement

Homework, if cooperatively carried out produces very good links between schools and parents, as school books enter the home with parents able to view the work.

Parents can be experts in certain jobs the school wants done which teachers have no time for due to demands within the curriculum. Parents can help with tidying the schools, library work, maintenance of equipment, organising school trips in conjunction with the headmaster. Some may even offer their own transport.

Parents can assist with the actual teaching e.g lessons which involve children talking to adults, courtesy lessons. Parents can even sit in class and simply talk to children. They can also sit and hear children read. Many children like to be seen or heard when reading by adults.

Some parents can also help in sports coaching, group work in social studies or even conducting safe scientific experiments, remember these parents were once students and some have positions of responsibility at their work places. They may not all be so daft as some professionals would want to imagine. All they require are clear instructions on what they are expected to do and handle.

The interaction of child, parent and teacher may be the greatest single force effecting the end result of education for a particular child. All things being equal the major influence on a child's ability to take advantage of educational opportunity seem to be his parents' attitude to education and interest in his school work. Teachers are linked to parents by the children for whom they are both responsible. The importance of involving parents in the education of their children lies in the fact that their involvement improves their children's educability.

4. Conclusion

The need for parental involvement arises from the fact that the influence of home on school performance is considerably greater than that of the school.

Parents are active and central in decision making and its implementation. They are perceived as having equal strengths and equal expertise. They are able to contribute to, as well as receive services. They share responsibility, thus they and professionals are mutually accountable for the education of children with special needs.

Home visits by teachers are important to oil the machinery of parental involvement. Children also feel proud to be visited in their homes. Parents and teachers would also understand each other easily. They would take greater interest in their child's work and support to school would increase.

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